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ABSTRACT

The eight course projects listed in this paper are designed specifically for a freshman-level open admissions course in children's literature, but they can be adapted to fit the needs of any beginning "topics" literature course that has students with widely varied preparation, ability, and goals. The projects include telling and reading stories; compiling an ethnic, national, or problem-focused reading list; making a journal of children's reactions to stories (or of students' reactions to topical reading materials); writing a children's story; leading children in writing poetry; making a crosscultural comparison of folktales; and writing an essay on a fairy tale from the viewpoint of Bruno Bettelheim. Whatever the topic of the course, the teacher can create a set of projects similar to these and stimulate the interests of students from a variety of backgrounds and with a variety of writing abilities. (RL)

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Course Projects for Open-Admission Literature Students: Challenging the Student Who Can't Write

The following course projects were developed for use in a freshman level open-admissions course in children's literature, but quite easily could be adapted to any "topics" course in a similar setting. I had two purposes in mind when I designed the projects. First, for the diverse population in the course, I wanted to make assignments which would demand high-quality, challenging and useful work, but which would not at the same time turn the open-door policy into a revolving door reality by excluding, de facto, those students whose writing skills stood in the way of their doing well on the traditional course paper. Second, I wanted to try to forge what I see as the missing link in the chain of children's reading: the course and the course projects had to have a parent-orientation--not the teacher- and librarian-orientation characteristic of children's literature courses--with the very tangible goal of getting real books into the hands of the real children in the students' homes.

Working with the projects were students who formed a delightfully heterogeneous group. Among the eighty enrolled in the course were a twenty-year-old ex-junkie-former-sharecropper mother of two; at least

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one grandmother; a large number of AFDC mothers enrolled under the Title XX program; middle-class married parents; three young men on a release program through the state department of corrections Project Newgate; any number of intentional and reluctant single parents; and the usual standard undergraduates from eighteen to twenty-two. The range of reading and writing skills was predictably broad, and the reading backgrounds varied from several students who had read--as children or as parents--all of the fourteen required titles to a larger number for whom any piece of children's literature was new.

With this background, then, let me list the projects as the students received them, adding appropriate evaluative annotations. Each student was required to select one. All students took midquarter and final exams.

Project 1: Telling and Reading Stories

This option consists of five extra small-group meetings and some work in the college's listening room or in the spoken word collection of your neighborhood branch library. We will discuss and listen to techniques for reading and telling stories which best gain and hold the interest of the child; we'll practice on and give constructive criticism to each other, all leading to a "recital" at the end. Limited to two groups of eight on a first-come basis. [This was the least threatening of the projects for the students whose writing skills were deficient. The results were mixed, though the students who worked at it eventually developed some good ideas about inflection, use of picture books, and pace.]

Project 2: Ethnic or National Reading List

This option consists of guided use of some resources in the library,

leading to a list of titles which relate to a particular ethnic group's literature for children. For instance, some of you may want to make a list of Afro-American folktales and picture books for very young readers; others might want to make a list of Irish stories; others might want to make a list of English translations of Native American tales. The possibilities are endless. In any case, you should note that you don't have to read all of the titles that you list, but your final report should indicate where the titles are available--at the downtown library, at your branch library, at a given bookshop, or wherever. [This option proved to be a very popular and practical one. The advantage was that one needn't be proficient in prose-writing to compile a list. More significantly, I think that many of the Black students in the course learned for the first time of the large amount of fine children's literature by and about Black people. One woman in particular comes to mind: with the aid of her local librarian, she and her children spent six hours poring over piles of materials--and came back the next night for more. Neither of the children had been in the library before. The library resources most useful here turned out to be local librarians, but Masha K. Rudman, Children's Literature: An Issues Approach (Heath, 1976), though flawed, is a useful resource, as are the coded bibliographies in May Hill Arbuthnot, Children and Books, 4th edition (Scott-Foresman, 1972).]

Project 3: Problem-focussed Reading List

This option consists of a guided use of a couple of resources in the library, leading to a list of titles of children's materials which have a common theme. For example, you might want to find books and stories which address the question of divorce. Or you might want to find materials

on death; or adolescent fiction which might help a teenager understand sex; or stories which talk about working--the list of such topics is endless. Once again, please note that you will not have to read all the titles, but your final report should show where the titles are available locally. [This too was a popular choice and a successful one. Predictable topics like death and divorce were covered several times. The most interesting list, however, was done by the mother of a cerebral palsy victim; her comments might best annotate this choice:

> "In beginning the research for this project, I did it partly on a selfish level. Children usually do not learn about those who are handicapped, but are "protected" and hushed by their parents. So they grow up staring, gawking and poking fun-- ignorant of and missing out on the opportunity of knowing another human being. I am the mother of an eight year old girl with cerebral palsy. Her younger brothers know her only as their big sister, not as something subhuman and unfeeling. But what about the other children in our society who have not been as lucky? What about those who never knew an "exceptional" child (or adult)?
>
> I made two discoveries in searching out information for this study. First of all I found only a relatively small number of books dealing with this problem. It was very evident in places like Courage Center and M. Dowling School for Crippled Children. How sad.
>
> I also found that by studying handicaps, you find yourself branching out into other differences. And everyone is different. If only parents would allow their children to see that!" (sic)]

Project 4: A Journal of a Child's Reactions

This will consist of your reading several of the assigned works to a child (preferably all to the same child) and recording and reflecting on the child's interest level and reactions. Fiction, folktales, and poetry should all be used, with the child's age determining your selection. This might be a good way to see what your child (or younger sibling, or nephew, etc.) likes, and it could serve as a way to develop in them an interest in reading and being read to. The journal, with dated entries, should be turned in at the end of the fifth and ninth weeks.

[Mixed results. Daily writing helped some, but seemed too difficult or too demanding for some of the underprepared students. The real benefits here were probably intangible--in the form of parents sitting down and reading to their kids at bedtime.]

Project 5: Writing a Children's Story

You must see me before electing this option.

[Only one student opted for this, and she had a story well under way. I was surprised at the lack of interest until I realized just how threatened by writing most of the students were.]

Project 6: Leading Children in Writing Poetry

Using Kenneth Koch's Wishes, Lies and Dreams as your guide, lead a group of several children in writing poems. Be sure to look at Koch before electing this. Naturally, you'll have to be able to collect a group of children for several sessions. A brief report on the Koch material and on the methods you used, as well as the children's poems, should be turned in.

[I was amazed at the quality of the work done on this by the three students--all mothers--who elected it. Once again, the reaction of one of the students will perhaps serve as the best annotation:

> "I really enjoyed this project! I was able to combine school and home and share neat feelings and times with my daughter and friends. They felt an integral part of my school life--which we felt real good about. The project and course became a part of our family life. A real treat coming back to school after 13 years! Thanks." (sic)]

Project 7: Cross-Cultural Comparison of Folktales

Using Andrew Lang's The Blue Fairy Book (and/or other anthologies approved by the instructor), write a 3-5 page essay which points out similarities and differences among folktales of several different cultures. Let your own interests determine which cultures. Consult with the instructor in getting started on this.

Project 8: Bruno Bettelheim on Fairy Tales

In the library reserve room, you will find an article by Dr. Bettelheim (a psychiatrist who specializes in children and the psychoanalysis of culture) entitled "The Uses of Enchantment" (New Yorker, December 8, 1975, pp. 50-114). Using this article as your starting point, write a 5 page essay on a tale from Grimms, Hans Christian Andersen, Andrew Lang, or some other source approved by the instructor. This essay should examine the tale as Bettelheim might (don't use one of the tales B uses). Consult with the instructor when you've done a rough draft.

[Options 7 and 8 were included so that students who were proficient in writing could use that proficiency in a more traditional course paper format if they chose.]

Though these projects were used more or less successfully in a children's literature class, it's quite easy to see how they might be adapted to any beginning "topics" literature course having a student population with widely varied preparation, ability, and goals. In a course in ethnic literature, for example, one might modify them along these lines:

#1: Reading ethnic literature aloud is especially important--such things as practicing the dialect used by various black writers, listening to traditional Native American poems and songs in their ceremonial contexts, or listening to an immigrant Jewish reader of Jewish tales could all be valuable adjuncts to the required reading assignments, but would not cause the poor writer to fail.

#2 and 3: Compiling a list of the literature of one's ethnic heritage for the sole purpose of knowing what's there could go very far toward achieving this primary informational goal of ethnic literature courses--for students of Finnish, Afro-American, Polish, and any cultural background.

#4: A journal of the student's own reactions as he reads the literature of ethnic groups different from his own could prove useful from a number of perspectives, from providing evidence that the reading has been done carefully to forcing the student to confront his own prejudices. The informal setting of the journal is less likely to defeat the poor writer than is that of the formal essay.

#5: The student might be asked to write a poem or story utilizing the language or history of his own ethnic group.

#6: The widespread interest in such things as Alex Haley's Roots might well inspire students to record conversations with older members of their family or community to get a sense of the richness of an ethnic past, whether that past be Black, Jewish, Irish, Eastern European, Scandinavian, Latin, etc.

#7 and 8: There is no shortage of traditional essay topics for the student who can write.

Whatever the topic of the course, the goal would be the same: to create a set of demands or guidelines which would stimulate work that is

intellectually sound and challenging, but which would not automatically exclude or defeat those students who are too often excluded--despite the good intentions of instructors--by more traditional methods and who are rightly insulted by the lowering of standards to accomodate them. More and more of our students can't write. We must be careful to adapt so that we and our institutions don't fail them before they have a chance to learn the writing skills they so sorely lack.